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Scott Kloeck Jenson International Internship Grant
Makaibari Tea Estates - Darjeeling, India

The Scott Kloeck Jenson Fellowship funded my internship at Makaibari Tea Estates in the Kurseong sub-district of Darjeeling. The Darjeeling district of the northeastern state of West Bengal is renowned for its tea, a commodity in high demand on both domestic and international markets. Some Darjeeling tea plantations have followed a growing trend in Indian agriculture and converted to “sustainable” agricultural methods, namely organic and fair-trade farming. Organic farming prohibits the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Fair-trade practices eliminate intermediaries and pay workers a price reflective of the amount actually yielded in the retail of the product; in some cases, fair-trade involves community participation in plantation decision making. In the United States, organic and fair-trade Darjeeling tea is a popular consumer product.

I was drawn to Makaibari because it is a certified fair-trade, organic, and biodynamic tea garden. Many tea laborers at Makaibari worked during the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, when chemical fertilizers and pesticides were touted as the key to productivity, and so witnessed the devastating effects these chemicals had on their health and environment. Under conventional production, workers are subject to agrochemicals, which are immunosuppressive, making people more susceptible to respiratory, gastrointestinal, and infectious diseases, as well as cancer and neurological disorders. Since the lower Himalayas are hilly and the use of tractors is infeasible, workers carry pesticides by hand and without protective clothing across sweeping hillside plantations.

I arrived thinking that I would be making compost and making biodynamic preparations (for example: packing cow horns full of cow manure and planting them on the corners of the fields and times appropriate in the lunar cycle). After meeting the owner of Makaibari Tea Estates, I realized that my “contribution” as an intern would be more complicated than such conventional service learning. He explained that I was to live in each of the villages of Makaibari for one week and then tell him about my experiences. Several times a week I approached the owner with a new concern. My main project was a goat-milking program. I observed that the residents of Makaibari buy (cow) milk from external sources everyday, but own many goats roaming around the plantation. These goats are bound for the market and sold for their meat. Over the course of my internship, I outlined a goat-milking program to supplement the cow milk workers buy everyday. First, I surveyed people’s interest and taste in goat milk products. Then, I asked many workers how much they pay for milk on a weekly basis and how much they sell their goat for in the market. Workers were excited about the possibilities of saving money but leery about the actual taste of goat milk in comparison to cow milk.

I left before the project got underway. But, this goat-milking programs was taken up by the “joint body,” Makaibari’s community organization. They liked the idea and were looking for goats large enough to be milked. In order to gain and maintain fair-trade certification, officials must find that all members of the community have a stake in the plantation’s decision-making process. The joint body, headed by Makaibari’s women, decides which developments and

community initiatives should be made with the increased revenues from fair-trade and organic production.

This internship gave the unique ability to circulate in both the realm of the workers and the realm of the management. I ate and lived; plucked tea; and went to the market with tea laborers. I also drank gin and tonics with planters at the Darjeeling Tea Association, went to meetings, and rode in private vehicles with owners and management, which gave me insight into the dynamics of these upper echelons. Most importantly, I was able to observe how each party talks about the other. My most exciting observation is that British colonial labor policies inspired the Plantation Labor Act of 1951, which granted workers housing, health care, food rations, and schooling for their children. Today, planters blame the Labor Act's "social costs" for the financial demise of many of Darjeeling plantations and claim that the industry would be stronger if the Act were repealed. Paradoxically, many of these same planters, seeing an emerging market for fair trade products, are seeking fair-trade certification while lamenting the "social costs" of the Labor Act.

I went home to the village and asked workers around about the Labor Act. Did workers know about it or understand the rights and privileges afforded to them by it? I found overwhelmingly that tea workers did not know that there was a Labor Act. However, I went to a medicinal plants plantation and the workers did engage with the Labor Act and were wary when it was violated.

I think that my greatest contribution to the lives of Darjeeling tea workers is yet to come. This internship enabled me to observe what concepts like organic and fair-trade mean and how they circulate in everyday life. For my dissertation research, I will return to investigate if these new philosophies of production have resulted in a meaningful change in the lives of the workers steeped in Darjeeling tea. First, I want to understand how fair-trade works on the plantation system, which is inherently hierarchal. According to Transfair, the only fair-trade certification agency in the United States, fair-trade empowers farming families, eliminating intermediaries and paying farmers a price reflective of the amount actually yielded in the retail of their products. Fair-trade certification teaches farmers to market their own products, so that they can bolster their own businesses without developing dependency on external aid. I want to grapple with the concept of "fair-trade" from the worker's point of view and analyze whether workers see this new philosophy of production as a way of alleviating rural poverty, as environmentalists, politicians, and scholars claim. Second, I want to explore how the conversion to organic production has changed workers' conceptions of their health and environment. How do workers talk about this new philosophy of production? I hope that my research will not only advance scholarship on the anthropology of labor and social justice but also serve to educate the public, both about the daily lives of fair-trade laborers and how to make tea production more equitable worldwide.